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## Chapter 19

### Cultivating hope through teacher leadership in Portugal

**Maria Assunção Flores and Maria Santos-Richmond**

Over the last few years, Portugal has been facing an economic and financial crisis, characterised by high levels of unemployment, salary cuts and high taxes which has affected the teaching profession. This has led to strikes and public demonstrations. Teachers have fought against an increase in workload, the loss of retirement benefits and policies focused on mobility and requalification. Teachers have also faced new mechanisms for teacher and school evaluation. These policies have increased the pressure on schools and teachers to raise teaching standards and to improve Portugal's position in international rankings (Flores *et al.*, 2016).

This chapter draws on a three-year national programme of research funded by the National Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal which investigated teachers' views about their professionalism. The study included an intervention in which teachers were invited to participate in a programme designed to enable them to exercise leadership in order to improve the conditions for teaching and learning in their schools and classrooms. The intervention was preceded by a national survey conducted through interviews and focus groups. The teacher leadership support programme, conducted in five schools, enabled the research team to find out more about how teachers construct their professionalism and to develop strategies to enhance their leadership.

Perceptions of teacher leadership have changed over time, particularly in the last two decades (Alexandrou and Swaffield, 2012). Teacher leadership can be related to formal roles and responsibilities (Supovitz, 2015) and can operate informally (Danielson, 2006). However, in the Teachers Exercising Leadership (TEL) project described in this chapter, the 'non-positional teacher leadership' approach promoted by HertsCam (Frost, 2011; 2012) was adopted. This involves teachers acting deliberately and strategically whether or not they hold any position of authority or responsibility. The programme in Portugal was seen as a catalyst, enabling teachers to share and co-construct professional knowledge and to network. Through this intervention the research team aimed to explore the conditions for teachers to exercise leadership and maintain

hope. We offer here a detailed view of two key events which took place as part of this project, reflecting on our learning from them.

### **Teacher leadership event, Braga, May 2014**

In May, 2014 a group of 13 teachers from the HertsCam Network accompanied David Frost to the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal to support a two day conference of the TEL project, developed collaboratively between HertsCam and the University. This project began in 2008 when Maria Flores from the University of Minho made an initial investigative visit to HertsCam to discover effective ways of supporting teachers to lead change. The project in Portugal developed along similar lines to the HertsCam Teacher Led Development Work programme, with a focus on teachers working collaboratively to embed positive change for students.

On the first afternoon delegates attended a ‘Teaching Professionalism and Leadership’ seminar. This was a presentation of the findings of the 3 year TEL project referred to above and the launch of their publication *Professionalismo e Liderança dos Professores* (Flores, 2014). David Frost gave a keynote address in which he echoed the point he had made in a preface to the book, that leadership should be integral to the role of all teachers. The study highlighted how pedagogical aspects of teachers’ work and collegial professionalism are very important to teachers and, although many teachers were demotivated by staff cuts, they are buoyed by the joy of teaching students.

The values and interests of teachers in Portugal seemed to be very similar to those of the teachers from the UK. For example, key themes from the study included motivation for learning, both within schools and in the local communities and how the positive views of the students were important to all teachers. The sense of professionalism, including the ethic of care, was a central theme that resonated with the delegates, demonstrating that internationally teaching is so much more than just a job and juxtaposing discouragement and resignation with energy and resilience.

After David’s address and comments from António Neto-Mendes, University of Aveiro and Amélia Lopes, University of Porto, debate followed with the audience of predominantly school teachers and leaders. It was evident that many embraced the principles of the TEL project and had engaged at varying levels with the idea of teachers leading change from within. There was

a level of frustration, and to some degree, fear, in going against the tide of apparent Government direction to pursue what they felt was their moral purpose as educators. It was illuminating to hear of some of the obstacles faced by school leaders and some of the frustrations, yet a continuing willingness to improve. One school principal shared her story about her demotion for refusing to comply with a government order to open her school, because she felt the school grounds had become unsafe. The fortunate position of teachers and headteachers in the UK, who can challenge authority and act with some autonomy with a certain element of job security, was underlined by this story. It was heartwarming to hear how, despite often clear barriers, school leaders continued to be guided by their own moral purpose to do what was right and strive for change within their schools.

On the second day the HertsCam teachers joined with a number of teachers from the northern Portugal region, who came to share their development work. A Gallery Walk, where teachers displayed posters depicting their development work, enabled us to see how, as teachers from different educational cultures, we still share common themes such as the desire to engage students and help them reach their potential; to explore how to work with colleagues to strengthen teacher leadership. Both English and Portuguese colleagues led seminars informed by a common vision for empowering teachers as arbiters of change. The HertsCam group made a presentation about strategies for supporting teacher leadership including the role of facilitators.

The day culminated in what has come to be known as our ‘heads, hands, hearts’ exercise where everyone shares their thoughts, their challenges and the golden nuggets they will take away with them to enact. We didn’t solve any great educational issues, we didn’t change government educational policies, but everyone in that room left with a feeling that their work did matter, that we do have the power to bring about change for the better, and however small, it does make a difference. The HertsCam group left the University of Minho that evening in a reflective but inspired mood, with a true sense of international collegiality and solidarity, where empowerment comes from each other and is not reliant on the vagaries of outside agencies. Over a two-year period (2014-2016) three network events were organised in Portuguese schools. In these events, teachers from the 5 schools gathered and shared the development of their different projects. A newsletter was produced in which teachers could write and reflect on their meetings, the network events and also their concerns and achievements.

## **Teacher leadership event, Lisbon, May 2016**

In May 2016 another team from HertsCam went to Montijo, Lisbon, where, along with Dr Maria Assunção Flores, they participated in another network event. Great work had been going on in the intervening 18 months, growing teacher leadership in Portugal. The event was hosted by Marta Alves, director of Cenforma Teacher Centre.

David Frost's opening presentation provided an overview of the international teacher leadership work and the rationale for the non-positional approach. The wide variety of projects displayed in the gallery walk by both English and Portuguese teachers were inspiring. Teachers were invited to stand by their posters depicting their development projects and to discuss them with those who viewed the posters. A series of workshops led by teachers from the two networks were opportunities to showcase development projects. During the workshops, Portuguese and English teachers were able to present, share and discuss in more detail their projects. Themes ranged from the development of strategies to foster reading in primary schools to the design of methods for involving students more actively in learning calculus. The discussion were very rich and enabled all participants to share their concerns and achievements.

Just before lunch Tracy Gatieri, Headteacher of Wormley Primary school, and Maria Santos Richmond, Assistant Headteacher at Sir John Lawes School, made a presentation: 'Sharing the vision of teacher-led development work'. This focused on the importance of support from the senior leadership team and their role in helping to engender a school culture where quality professional development was valued. The speakers shared with Portuguese colleagues how empowering support for teacher leadership could be, and how it could result in real impact for a school, its pupils, teachers and the wider community. For some school leaders, giving teachers autonomy is seen as a risk, for others, a liberation. The British visitors said that it was a privilege to have the opportunity to share these ideas at the conference. Mostly, however, it was a day to celebrate the achievements of teachers and to understand the commitment to a profession which draws them to gather together at a weekend to reflect on their professional concerns and develop practice together.

## **Teachers' voices**

Teachers involved in the TEL initiatives were very positive about their experiences and learning through networking. At the end of the conference, we used the same ‘heads, hearts and hands’ activity we had used in the Braga conference calling upon participants to stick their comments up on the wall. Despite the challenging circumstances in which they work, arising from poor working conditions, no career progression, lack of social recognition and a decrease in their salaries (see Flores, 2014), teachers talked about resilience, hope and different sources of motivation that keep them in teaching:

*My main concern is being able to get the necessary energy to keep myself motivated and to motivate my students for learning.*

*I keep trying to innovate and to improve my practice, trying to motivate the students for learning and developing their competences.*

*As a teacher you feel unmotivated with all that is going on in the education system, but you need a positive attitude in order to motivate your students for learning.*

*I try to make an effort to carry on keeping in mind the goal that has made me choose this profession, I mean, my students!*

Issues of school culture, supportive leadership, a sense of vocationalism and strong professional values were at the forefront of their accounts. They stressed the opportunities for learning and collaborated with colleagues in a more informal and less bureaucratic atmosphere, with a focus on their real problems and concerns. They also highlighted the potential of teacher collaboration and networking, as well as the awareness of their role as change agents in their school contexts.

*I am lucky because in my school there is an open climate for developing projects in the different departments...*

*The most important thing for me is the collaboration that you feel in this school... colleagues are easy to approach to be involved in projects at school.*

*You feel supported by the school leadership. As a teacher you have freedom to develop new ideas and initiatives...*

*Being able to create opportunities to reflect and to share ideas with colleagues in a safe environment helps you change your practice.*

*I have learned how to reflect in a more systematic way and trying to change something in my practice.*

*I have improved my reflective skills with the activities that we have engaged in...*

*I have learned that as a teacher I can take the lead and do something for myself, for my school and for the teaching profession.*

*My main learning has been the ability to work collaboratively in projects with other colleagues in my school. And this has enhanced my self-esteem.*

*I have learned that professional knowledge may be built in a collective way... As a teacher you can be a leader in your school...*

*Getting feedback from peers in a more informal way and in a safe and supportive environment has helped me a lot to change my perspective as a teacher...*

To sum up, the TEL project in Portugal points to the possibility of building professional knowledge, sharing experiences and ideas and enhancing professional motivation and morale through well-structured programmes of support for teacher leadership. Both structural and cultural issues emerged, namely the professional and school culture, the school leadership and the personal and professional values as teachers, as key mediating influences on teacher learning and professional development. Overall, this study provides fascinating empirical evidence of the complexity of teacher learning and leadership. It also highlights the need to support and sustain teachers' continuing professional development in the workplace through a view of teachers as lifelong learners and of schools as professional learning communities. The collaboration between colleagues in Portugal and the HertsCam Network is ongoing.

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